

# ‘I Love Cherish Idolise Adore and Worship You’: Lesbian Love in the Work of Gertrude Stein

Florence Maguire

BA English Literature

Faculty of Humanities and  
Social Sciences

15070932@brookes.ac.uk

## Introduction

- Gertrude Stein was an American writer of the Modernist era, a literary period in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- Censorship laws in the Modernist period, in both Britain and the United States, decreed that any literary material deemed to be obscene, involving overt or unusual sexual themes, could be censored.
- Lesbian literature was censored as the contemporary view of lesbians were that they were ‘abnormal’ or ‘deviant’.
- These were the conditions wherein Gertrude Stein met Alice B. Toklas in Paris, France, in 1907.
- This research aims to examine how Stein depicts lesbian sexuality in a time where homosexuality was far from normalized and accepted.

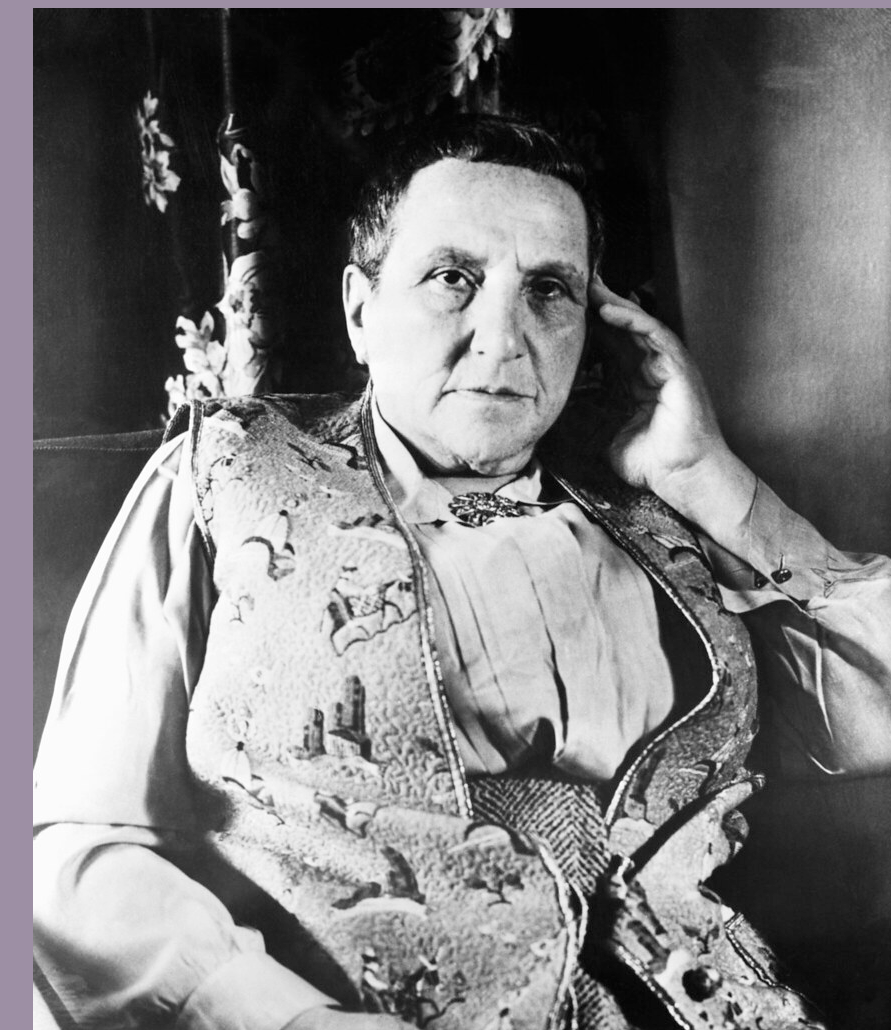


Figure 1

## Sexual Wordplay

Stein uses wordplay and the rejection of habitual associations to construct new word meanings to denote lesbian sexual material, just as she constructed her own queer space with Alice B. Toklas, using these new terms and phrases to fill the gap left by the inability to freely express same-sex love.

## Subverting Gender

Stein uses traditional forms of writing to ‘counteract the absence of lesbians from much of heteropopular culture’. By inscribing herself into traditionally heterosexual forms of writing, Stein subverts phallogocentric gender norms through placing women who love women at the centre of her work.

## Queer Domesticity

Stein’s work reflects the everyday life in the home she built with Alice B. Toklas, a radical act given that Stein and Toklas’s home country, the United States did not repeal sodomy laws until after both women were dead. By creating a home together in Paris, Stein and Toklas were able to live in a city more encouraging and accepting of lesbian love.

## Conclusion

- Despite restrictive social barriers, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas were able to maintain a loving life together, which is evident in Stein’s work despite the coded wordplay necessary to avoid censorship.
- In terms of limitations, focusing on this singular aspect of Stein’s writing creates a narrow reading of the multiplicity of meanings that Stein’s texts have.
- It is also important to acknowledge that although Stein was progressive in terms of her expression of lesbian sexuality, there are aspects of her work that now seem problematic to a reader in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although Stein should be celebrated for being a lesbian luminary, she should also be held accountable for the ways in which her writing has become outdated.



Figure 2

## References

Griffin, Gabriele, ‘Introduction’, in *Outwrite: Lesbianism and Popular Culture*, ed. by Gabriele Griffin (London: Pluto Press, 1992), pp. 1-8

Stein, Gertrude, *Lifting Belly: An Erotic Poem* (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2020)

Figure 1: Van Vechten, Carl, ‘Portrait of Gertrude Stein, New York’ [online] <[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gertrude\\_stein.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gertrude_stein.jpg)> [accessed 30 March 2021]

Figure 2: Associated Press, ‘Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas’ [online] <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/78162765@N00/3416117675/>> [accessed 30 March 2021]